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Human-Ecological Interactions and the Evolution of Land Perceptions in Local Communities: An Analysis of Indonesian Literature

Land is not just a physical entity, but a cultural artifact embedded in historical, ecological, and socio-political dynamics. In Indonesian local narratives, land functions as a place of conflict, where modernization, capitalism, and environmental degradation intersect with indigenous cultural knowledge and values. This study examines the transformation of perceptions of land in selected Indonesian literary works, employing the frameworks of ecosemiotics and ecocriticism to analyze how narratives encode shifting human-land relations. By analyzing novels such as *Mata di Tanah Melus*, *Tanjung Kemarau*, *Api Awan Asap*, *Tanah Tabu*, and *Sanggarguri*, this study reveals how literature functions as an ecological archive that records the socio-environmental struggles of local communities. Findings show that traditional conceptualizations of land-rooted in spiritual, communal, and ecological ethics-are increasingly challenged by capitalist expansion, urbanization, and environmental exploitation. This has led to the evolving and shifting perceptions of how local Indonesian communities view land. This study highlights how Indonesian literature articulates resistance to land commodification and environmental deprivation through symbolic and narrative strategies. This interdisciplinary approach contributes to the environmental humanities by emphasizing the role of storytelling in fostering ecological awareness and advocating for sustainable land management. Ultimately, this research underscores the cultural significance of land in the local imagination and its implications for environmental justice and conservation efforts in Indonesia.

KEY WORDS: *Indonesian literature, land perception, ecosemiotics, indigenous knowledge.*

Introduction and Methodology

Land has always been central to human life, serving as a foundation for survival, identity, and spirituality. Across cultures, land is not simply a resource but a cultural artifact imbued with meanings shaped by historical, ecological and socio-cultural factors (Ingold, 2021). As a contested terrain where historical, economic and environmental forces converge, land often reflects the struggles of marginalized communities in the face of ecological exploitation (Sodikoff, 2012).

From various perspectives, land has been conceptualized in diverse ways. In anthropology, land is seen as a fundamental aspect of indigenous peoples' cosmol-

ogy and cultural identity, shaping social structures and traditional knowledge systems (Escobar 2018). Environmental history examines land as a contested space influenced by historical land use practices, colonialism, and conservation policies (Cronon, 1996; Robbins, 2019). In legal studies, land is often framed within discourses of property rights, ownership, and governance, particularly in the context of agrarian reform and land tenure systems (Rosset et al., 2006). Meanwhile, political ecology focuses on land as a site of power struggles, where economic interests, environmental policies and local resistance intersect (Blaikie & Brookfield, 2015; Robbins, 2020).

However, rapid environmental degradation, urbanization, and socioeconomic pressures have altered traditional perceptions of land, particularly in local Indonesian communities. Rapid changes in social and environmental ecosystems have significantly impacted local people's perceptions of land, with modernization and globalization further eroding the traditional values attached to this geographic space. According to Escobar (2018), economic globalization has triggered a transformation in the way people understand land, from a spiritual and cultural entity to a tradable economic commodity. This resonates with the findings of Peluso and Lund (2013), who highlight that the process of land capitalization is often accompanied by social tensions, forced evictions, and shifting community identities. Urban expansion and large-scale infrastructure projects have transformed rural landscapes into industrialized economic hubs, challenging the concept of land as part of ancestral and community heritage (Li, 2020). As a result, local communities face a dilemma between maintaining a cultural connection to the land or adjusting to new economic realities.

This change in local people's paradigm about land is not only from an economic aspect, but also from socio-cultural evolution. This shows that socio-cultural evolution is a dynamic process closely related to changes in social structures and cultural values in society. Cultural values and perspectives on nature and land are influenced by factors such as tradition, technology, and political-economic dynamics (Bennett et al., 2018). This evolution can be understood through structuralist and cultural approaches, which show how changes in social and cultural structures influence patterns of human behavior. In this context, perceptions of land are often influenced by various social and cultural factors that shape how people view land as a resource. These perceptions also evolve with the changing times, which include the influence of modernization, industrialization, and globalization. Land, once viewed as a living space inseparable from tradition, is now often viewed through the lens of economics and capital.

In the past, land had a sacred value in many Indonesian societies. For example, in Madura, the concept of *tanah sangkolan* (ancestral land) symbolizes intergenerational responsibility and cultural identity (Kholiyudani & Hipni, 2024; Julian, 2022).

Similarly, in Javanese society, land is often seen as a sacred heritage associated with spirituality and ecological balance (Endraswara, 2016). However, this paradigm shifts due to external pressures such as commodification, migration and modernization. This change is reflected in various Indonesian literary works that depict the evolution of local communities' understanding of land and natural resources. Literature can serve as an ecological archive that documents local communities' socio-cultural changes and land perceptions. Nixon (2019) highlights that the concept of slow violence in literature helps reflect the long-term impacts of environmental exploitation that are often not directly visible. Therefore, studying literary texts can provide deeper insights into how local communities understand and respond to changes in their relationship with land. This perspective is important in understanding the socio-cultural evolution of land perception in Indonesia and how literature plays a role in building ecological awareness towards environmental sustainability.

Many contemporary Indonesian novels address issues such as land grabbing, environmental degradation, and local community resistance to land control by external actors. Royyan Julian's *Tanjung Kemarau*, for example, illustrates how land is no longer understood merely as a physical space, but also as a symbol of resistance to capitalism and deforestation. From an ecosemiotic perspective, this evolving meaning of nature reflects the ongoing negotiation between traditional values and other evolving interests (Kull, 2022; Nazaruddin, 2021; Efendi et al., 2025). In this context, literature plays an important role in representing the dynamics of changes in people's perceptions of land, as well as offering critique of environmental and development policies that often overlook aspects of social and ecological sustainability.

Literature and ecocriticism provide another lens through which to view the land. In literary studies, land is not only a setting, but also an active agent that influences narrative and character development. Postcolonial ecocriticism, for example, investigates how land is represented in literature as a space of resistance to imperial exploitation and environmental destruction (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015; Rahman, 2021; Hartnett, 2021; Efendi et al., 2025). Moreover, recent research has also increasingly highlighted how local communities adapt to climate change and how ecological narratives are constructed in various media, including literature and film (Ahmadi et al., 2017; Geal, 2021; Kumar, 2024). In an ecosemiotic framework, nature can be analyzed as a semiotic entity that carries cultural and ecological meanings, which influence human interactions and environmental ethics (Maran & Kull, 2014).

Over the past decade, research on human and ecological interactions has grown significantly, with researchers examining themes such as ecological resistance (Ahmed & Hashim, 2015; Ijaz & Hashmi, 2023; Nwagbara, 2010), nature preservation myths (Efendi et al., 2024; Nongbri, 2006), and environmental justice (Sze, 2002; Tait, 2023; McNeil et al., 2012). These studies further emphasize the role of

literature as a medium for encoding ecological awareness and documenting local knowledge systems (Boyce & Lewis, 2009; Mehnert, 2016; Fiskio, 2021). Tsing (2015) emphasizes how local narratives often reflect the impact of land exploitation by extractive industries on the lives of indigenous peoples. Similarly, Heise's (2016) study also underlines that literary works can be cultural archives that record how communities experience and respond to environmental change.

Despite these contributions, existing research tend to focus more on the ecological crisis itself rather than the evolving perceptions of land in literary narratives. Although research on human-ecological interactions in Indonesian literature has grown, there remains a gap in exploring how perceptions of land in local communities evolve in literary narratives over time. Most studies focus more on ecological impacts in literary texts without deeply analyzing how the concept of land has shifted in meaning across Indonesian literature. In fact, the changing perception of land is also related to how people maintain or lose their local wisdom in managing the environment. Literature that tells local stories about land can be a cultural archive, capturing how communities face changing times while maintaining their ecological identity. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of Indonesian literary works that illustrate the transformation of land perception amidst socio-environmental changes.

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates ecocriticism and cultural semiotics to examine how literature mediates human and land relations. Using an ecosemiotic framework, this research reveals how symbols, metaphors, and narratives construct and redefine meanings related to land management and ecology (Buell, 2017; Kull, 2018; Noth, 1990). This perspective provides a deeper understanding of how literary representations shape environmental awareness and influence cultural attitudes towards sustainability.

The main objective of this study is to investigate how Indonesian literature articulates human-ecological interactions and shifting perceptions of land within local communities. Through qualitative textual analysis, this research examines selected literary works to uncover the socio-environmental discourses embedded in their narratives. By situating Indonesian literature within a broader discourse on human-environment interactions, this research contributes to the field of environmental humanities. It underscores the role of storytelling in fostering ecological awareness and advocating for sustainable land management. Ultimately, this research aims to highlight the significance of land culture in local people's imaginations and conservation efforts in Indonesia.

This study uses a qualitative research design with a hermeneutic-ecocritical approach to analyze the transformation of land perception in Indonesian literature. This research combines ecosemiotics (Maran & Kull, 2014) and cultural ecology (Ingold, 2021) to examine how narratives in literature construct human-ecological interac-

tions over time. By adopting interpretative textual analysis, this research seeks to uncover the ideological, ecological, and socio-cultural discourses underlying literary works. Primary data consists of selected Indonesian literary works that depict land as their main theme. The selection criteria include (1) works that explore land ownership, ecological conflicts, indigenous perspectives, and environmental degradation; (2) novels written by Indonesian authors; (3) texts that explicitly involve local people's experiences with land use, conservation, or disputes. Based on these criteria, the primary data of this study include the novels *Mata di Tanah Melus* by Okky Madasari (2018) which represents the people of East Nusa Tenggara, *Tanjung Kemarau* by Royyan Julian (2017) which represents the people of Madura, East Java, *Api Awan Asap* by Korrie Layun Rampan (1999) which represents the Dayak people of Kalimantan, *Tanah Tabu* by Anindita S. Thayf (2009) which represents the people of Papua, and *Sanggarguri* by Lalu Agus Fathurrahman (2014) which represents the people of Sasak, Lombok.

The analysis follows the eco-critical discourse framework (Buell, 2017; Garrard, 2023), which consists of three main stages, namely (1) thematic coding by identifying recurring themes such as the commoditization of land, spiritual connection to land, and resistance to environmental degradation; (2) narrative analysis by examining how characters, settings, and conflicts shape perceptual representations of land; (3) ecosemiotic interpretation by analyzing how the symbolic meaning of land changes over time, particularly in response to socio-political and ecological transformations (Maran & Kull, 2014). To ensure rigor, this research uses triangulation by comparing findings from various literature sources and critical interpretations. Discussions with Indonesian literature experts and environmental humanities experts were conducted to validate thematic patterns. Additionally, historical and ethnographic references were used to align literary representations with real-world socio-ecological dynamics. By applying this methodological framework, this research aims to provide a comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of how perceptions of land in Indonesian literature have evolved in response to environmental and socio-political changes.

Sacred Land and Colonial Dispossession in *Mata di Tanah Melus* (2018) by Okky Madasari

The relationship between indigenous peoples and their lands is deeply rooted in historical, cultural and ecological dimensions. For many indigenous groups, land is not just a physical entity, but also a living space with spiritual meaning, a sense of communal identity, and intergenerational responsibility (Berkes, 2017; Escobar, 2018). However, as global capitalism and colonial corporations continue to

invade traditional territories, these communities face growing threats, such as eviction, natural resource extraction, and ecological degradation. Indonesian literature has played an important role in documenting these tensions, offering a lens through which readers can understand the evolving perceptions of land and environmental resistance among indigenous groups.

One of the most compelling literary works on this theme is *Mata di Tanah Melus* (Madasari, 2018), which chronicles the struggle of the Melus people (a fictionalized name representing the Atambua region) in East Nusa Tenggara against outside forces that seek to usurp their ancestral land. The novel intricately weaves an eco-critical perspective, depicting the deep spiritual and ecological connection between local people and their homeland while highlighting the violent intrusions brought by foreigners. Through an ecosemiotic-cultural lens, this study explores how *Mata di Tanah Melus* reflects indigenous peoples' perceptions of land, the impact of colonial intervention, and the symbolic transformation of land narratives in Indonesian literature. The Melus people believe that their happiness is inseparable from the land of birth that they have inherited. The Melus people always protect their homeland and pass it on to the next generation. However, expansion from outsiders comes with the intention of controlling the land and resources. This is as shown in the following quote.

"I was born a child of Melus. That was long ago, over a hundred years ago. A time when the inhabitants of Lakaan were the happiest people on earth. When we all lacked for nothing and were not bothered by anything. Our only job was to protect the land of our birth, to preserve our heritage."

"But then those people came. Men who were violent like animals. They carried weapons the likes of which we had never seen. Weapons that were noisy and deadly. They also launched fireballs from a distance. They were people from afar who wanted to rule Lakaan. They wanted to finish off all the Melus people, then take all the treasures and heirlooms stored in the bowels of Lakaan." (Madasari, 2018, p. 137)

The novel outlines how the Melus community faces various challenges related to their efforts to maintain and preserve their homeland. The worldview of the Melus people, as depicted in the novel, aligns with the cosmology of indigenous peoples around the world who regard the land as a living entity intertwined with spiritual and cultural continuity (Berkes, 2017). The phrase "*The time when the inhabitants of Lakaan were the happiest people on earth*" describes ecological harmony before disturbance, reflecting a biocentric ontology that contrasts sharply with the anthropocentric, exploitative paradigm introduced by foreign powers (Latour, 2018; Kohn, 2013). This phenomenon is in line with the concept of sacred ecology, where land is a spiritual sanctuary and a system of socio-ecological balance, which is only disrupted by capital-driven encroachment (Posey, 2004; Howitt, 2002).

In her narrative, Okky Madasari also describes the invasion from outside- “Humans who were violent like animals ... carrying weapons we had never seen”- as a direct attack on the territorial sovereignty and cultural integrity of the Melus community. These violent confrontations mirror historical patterns of extractivity, in which land is transformed from a sacred communal entity into a commodified and militarized space (Crosby, 2004; Tsing, 2015). The mention of “fireballs” evokes not only technological asymmetries, but also symbolizes the deepening divide in indigenous peoples’ perceptions of land – an existential threat to ecological and social reproduction.

The plight of the Melus In *Mata di Tanah Melus* parallels the real-world struggles of indigenous peoples against land grabbing, such as the Dayak in Kalimantan (Haboddin, 2011), the Anak Dalam in Batang Hari, Jambi (Akbar, 2022), the Ibadan in Nigeria (Obuene et al., 2022), and the Māori in Aotearoa, New Zealand (Oldham et al., 2024). The experiences of these communities reflect a global pattern of indigenous resistance (Scott, 2009) to extractive industries, deforestation and state-imposed conservation policies that often ignore local epistemologies.

From an ecosemiotic-cultural perspective, the quote indicates that land is symbolically coded as a repository of history and trauma. “*They want to wipe out all the Melus people, then take all the treasures and heirlooms stored in the belly of Lakaan*”-reveals a shift in the perception of land from a nurturing space to an endangered and extractable commodity. This transition reflects what Nixon (2011) refers as “slow violence”, where long-term ecological and cultural erosion caused by colonization and economic exploitation manifests as intergenerational loss.

Moreover, the text illustrates the semiotic encoding of resistance, where myths, oral traditions and storytelling become mechanisms for reclaiming indigenous ecological narratives (Haraway, 2016; Basso, 1996). Therefore, the Melus indigenous people’s struggle is not only for land, but also epistemic and semiotic sovereignty- a resistance to hegemonic narratives that seek to erase indigenous peoples’ place-based knowledge. The novel *Mata di Tanah Melus* exemplifies the interweaving of ecological, cultural and political narratives in Indonesian literature, demonstrating that land is not only a physical entity but also a living, layered space that holds the memories and identities of generations.

Changes in people’s perceptions of land reflect not only economic transformation, but also a shift in cultural and spiritual values passed down through generations. In many local communities, land is not just a material asset, but an integral part of the collective identity and belief systems that govern human relationships with the surrounding environment (Ingold, 2021). However, globalization and the expansion of capitalism have often forced local communities to adapt new ways of looking at land, oriented towards economic value rather than ecological or spiritual value. This has led to structural changes in land ownership and use, as portrayed in various literary narratives that explore agrarian and ecological issues.

Commodification of Ancestral Land in *Tanjung Kemarau* (2017) by Royyan Julian

The relationship between humans and their environment has emerged as a central theme in ecological literature, particularly in contexts where economic development challenges traditional land ethics. This phenomenon is especially true in societies with deep-rooted agrarian traditions, such as Madura. Royyan Julian, in his novel *Tanjung Kemarau* (2017), explores how Madurese people face the dilemma of preserving the sacredness of ancestral land while confronting the pressures of modern economic demands. The novel illustrates how myths, beliefs, and local wisdom related to land are losing their influence amidst the dominance of capitalism and urbanization forces. In this context, *Tanjung Kemarau* can be analyzed through ecosemiotic and political ecology lenses to understand how evolving perceptions of land within local communities are intertwined with broader economic, social, and environmental dynamics. These dynamics are exemplified in the following excerpt from the novel..

It is no wonder that the people of Sumenep sell their sangkolan land, their inherited land, to investors. Because they consider money more valuable than fields. The sacredness of inheritance has been stripped away. They may no longer believe in the luck of the country. The curse of sangkolan land that is believed to befall the person who sells it is considered a mere superstition (Julian, 2021, p. 93).

The quote summarizes the paradigm shift in the perception of land in Madurese society, where economic imperatives increasingly override traditional ecological and spiritual values. The quote reads, “The sacredness of inheritance has been stripped away. They may no longer believe in the luck of the country. The curse of sangkolan land that is believed to befall the person who sells it is considered mere superstition.” This passage reflects the process of gradual deconstruction of traditional values that previously governed people’s relationship with land. . It illustrates a transition in which the commodification of ancestral land (*tanah sangkolan*) and desacralization, which reflects the existing socio-ecological transformation. This phenomenon is in line with Scott (2009) on state-induced changes in subsistence patterns and customary land use, demonstrating how external economic pressures reshape local cultural landscapes.

The novel’s depiction of land transactions highlights the fundamental divide between past and present ecological ideologies. Traditional societies have historically viewed land as an inheritance linked to sacred narratives, yet contemporary market forces have replaced these values with materialist tendencies. This transition resonates with Brosius et al. (2005), who reveal that global neoliberal encroach-

ment on indigenous peoples' ecological knowledge, and such shifts trigger socio-environmental alienation. In *Tanjung Kemarau*, the myth of the "curse" of selling *sangkolan* land, previously a deterrent to land commodification, is considered a mere superstition, reflecting a trend of desacralization also evident in other indigenous communities undergoing rapid economic transition.

In cultural ecosemiotics, land is understood not only as a physical resource, but also as a symbol of identity, history, and cultural values. When communities sell heirloom land to investors, they are not merely relinquishing physical ownership, but also losing the spiritual and cultural aspects attached to the land. Moreover, the narrative reflects the ongoing struggle between ecological ethics and capitalist expansion. Escobar (2018) argues that the neoliberal development agenda systematically erodes local epistemologies, forcing indigenous communities to prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term ecological sustainability. In the context of Madura, this has resulted in the irreversible loss of agricultural landscapes and the erosion of local ecological wisdom.

Royyan Julian's narrative through a human-ecological lens, serves as a critique and documentation of how perceptions of land evolve under economic pressure. The erosion of belief in the sacredness of *sangkolan* land is in line with broader global trends. According to Agatha (2016), customary land management practices are being systematically undermined. The novel therefore serves not only as a literary representation of environmental disempowerment, but also as evidence of the ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity in land ethics. With reference to Hornborg's (2021) political ecology framework, this can be interpreted as a narrative exploration of asymmetrical power relations that drives environmental transformation.

Environmental Degradation and Indigenous Resistance in *Api Awan Asap* (1999) by Korrie Layun Rampan

Korrie Layun Rampan's novel *Api Awan Asap* (1999) presents a nuanced depiction of human-environment interaction, particularly within the context of the indigenous Dayak people in Kalimantan. The novel depicts the traditional land-use practices of the Dayak people, which emphasize a sustainable cycle of land cultivation that involves a fallow period to restore soil fertility. This traditional ecological knowledge, as articulated by Berkes (2017), aligns with the principles of adaptive resource management, which emphasize the importance of long-term ecological balance.

However, as depicted in the novel, external economic forces, particularly those driven by urban expansion and industrial logging, disrupt the ecological equilibrium

maintained by traditional practices. The section describing uncontrolled deforestation and large-scale forest burning highlights the ecological damage caused by exploitative industries. This reflects a global trend where indigenous territories face environmental degradation due to unsustainable economic activities (Colchester, 2003). The image of a “low-hanging cloud of smoke” signifies not only physical destruction, but also a metaphor for the suffocation of indigenous peoples’ ecological wisdom. This can be seen in the following quote.

If the old land is considered to have had enough time to be cultivated, people will return to it. Soil fertility is generally determined by the length of time the land is left overgrown with shrubs. The leaves of the trees that fall to the ground will form humus as fertilizer.

The smell of fire smoke drifted in from outside the lou. Forest fires are like scourges and ghosts that invade villages and towns. On the horizon hang clouds of smoke coming from various directions. Television cameras are unable to record the smell of fire smoke, but are able to record the clouds of smoke that hang very low.

“So, there is a certain wisdom in cultivating forests and land?”

“That wisdom is what makes people not carelessly cut down or dig. But people who come from the city greedily clear the forest, take trees, dig mines, and clear the land, burning the forest until the smoke of fire covers the sky (Rampan, 1999, p. 30).

The quote underscores the Dayak people’s cyclical approach to tillage, where they have periods that allow for natural soil regeneration. The quote-“The fertility of the soil is generally determined by the length of time it is left overgrown with shrubs”-exemplifies a form of agroforestry that is in line with contemporary principles of sustainable land management (Altieri, 2018). This practice contrasts with extractive logging and mining activities that disrupt ecological balance.

The novel *Api Awan Asap* deeply critiques external economic forces that marginalize indigenous perspectives on sustainability. A quote, “That wisdom is what makes people not carelessly cut down or dig. But people who come from the city greedily clear the forest, take trees, dig mines, and clear the land, burning the forest until the smoke of fire covers the sky”- emphasizes the tension between traditional ecological knowledge and modern exploitation practices. Korrie Layun Rampan criticizes external actors who exploit natural resources without regard to ecological sustainability. This align with Brosius et al. (2005), who examine how indigenous peoples’ knowledge systems are undermined by external economic pressures, resulting in socio-environmental alienation.

The imagery of “The smell of fire smoke wafting from outside the lou” and “clouds of smoke coming from various directions” serve as ecosemiotic symbols of

environmental degradation. Fire and smoke, a recurring motif in the novel, symbolize ecological destruction and the erasure of indigenous agency. The inability of the television camera to capture the “smell of fire smoke” reflects the limitations of the media in fully conveying the environmental crisis. In addition, the narrative reflects the ongoing struggle between ecological ethics and capitalist expansion. In the context of Kalimantan, this has resulted in the permanent loss of forest landscapes and local ecological wisdom.

The shift from land as a communal and sacred entity to a commoditized resource reflects a broader transformation in the perception of land. The novel depicts land not only as a place for survival, but also as a contested space where traditional values are challenged by external economic and political forces. This aligns with recent studies on indigenous land grabbing and land commodification in Southeast Asia (Hall et al., 2011). Korrie Layun Rampan’s narrative, through a human-ecological lens, serves as a critique and documentation of how perceptions of land evolve under economic pressure. *Api Awan Asap* not only functions as a literary representation of environmental powerlessness, but also as evidence of the ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity in land ethics.

Land as a Symbol of Indigenous Sovereignty in *Tanah Tabu* (2009) by Anindita S. Thayf

The conceptualization of land among indigenous peoples is deeply embedded in cultural, spiritual, and ecological worldviews. In many traditional societies, land is not merely a material asset, but an ancestral legacy that embodies identity, memory, and sustainability. However, in the face of economic expansion, state intervention, and neoliberal capitalism, indigenous peoples’ relationship with land is undergoing a fundamental transformation (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2020).

Anindita S. Thayf’s *Tanah Tabu* (2009) presents a critical literary reflection on the erosion of Papuan indigenous land ethics due to external economic pressures. The novel explores how traditional land management, which prioritizes ecological sustainability and intergenerational responsibility, is systematically undermined by external commodification and exploitation. Anindita S. Thayf’s *Tanah Tabu* offers a literary reflection on this tension, depicting the resistance of indigenous Papuans to the exploitation of their ancestral land. This is as in the following excerpt.

How can anyone born in this land just give up their mountain to a foreigner? No! The mountain is not sago. It’s not red fruit. It is not for sale. Our land is sacred, son. Taboo. Created by the Almighty especially for us, do you know why? Because He knew we could be counted on to protect it.

“I tell you, Leksi, that’s why our ancestors have always lived simply. Just the way things are. Taking what they needed from nature, and returning the rest back to nature to keep as a legacy for their children and grandchildren. You and your descendants. But unfortunately, son, there are those among our descendants who give our heritage to strangers. Not only that, he also became like them.” (Thayf, 2009, p. 74).

The quote suggests internal divisions within indigenous communities, with some members succumbing to external pressures. This phenomenon aligns with Tsing’s (2005) discussion of the “friction” between global economic forces and local cultural practices, where indigenous groups choose between resistance and assimilation. The imposition of state-backed capitalist ventures often marginalizes indigenous voices, eroding not only territorial sovereignty but also cultural identity. This is evident in the novel’s lament over Papuan land being ceded to foreign interests, which symbolizes the broader indigenous struggle against neocolonial economic policies.

The *Tanah Tabu* narrative explores the disintegration of indigenous identity when land becomes a contested commodity. The quote suggests that indigenous peoples’ fundamental belief that land is non-negotiable—it is a living entity, not a commercializable resource. Scholars such as Berkes (2017) argue that indigenous peoples’ environmental knowledge is rooted in a reciprocal relationship with nature, where human actions must align with ecological balance. This perspective contrasts sharply with extractive economic models imposed by external actors, often rationalized under the guise of development.

Transformation in *Tanah Tabu* resonates with the political ecology framework that examines the relationship between power, environment, and economic control. The narrative reveals how the loss of customary land is not merely an economic event, but a political act of dispossession of territorial rights. The imposition of an external land governance regime leads to what Escobar (2018) calls the erasure of place-based ontologies, where the epistemology of customary land is replaced by state and corporate interests. The dialogue in the novel shows a deep awareness of this asymmetry of power: “The mountain is not sago. Not red fruit. Not for sale.” By explicitly rejecting the commodification of land, the text articulates a form of resistance to the capitalist rationalization of land (Harvey, 2003).

The phrase “Our land is sacred, son. Taboo. Created by the Almighty especially for us” reflects an ecosemiotics worldview, where land is not just an object, but a sentient and sacred entity. In the belief system of indigenous Papuans, the land is filled with spiritual presence and collective memory. By applying an ecosemiotics perspective, the quote constructs land as a semiotic sign representing ancestral heritage as land that is not individually owned but collectively managed across generations. This aligns with the concept of intergenerational ecological management, a principle emphasized by scholars such as Martinez-Alier (2013), who discusses how

indigenous peoples' environments are often at odds with extractive capitalism. As such, the novel serves as a literary articulation of resistance to the encroachment of market-driven ideologies into indigenous spaces. Moreover, the spiritual and ecological interdependence (taboos) in the sale of land signifies its intrinsic non-commercial value. This perception contrasts sharply with the capitalist commoditization of land, which reduces land to an economic asset. Thayf's use of the term taboo serves as an ideological boundary, distinguishing between indigenous environmental ethics and modern economic rationality.

In addition, the state's role in the commodification of land is evident in policies that promote extractive industries over the sovereignty of indigenous peoples. McCarthy and Cramb (2009) highlight how state-backed agrarian change in Southeast Asia has led to a reconfiguration of indigenous peoples' land rights, often justified on the basis of national economic growth narratives. This process, which parallels developments in *Tanah Tabu*, underscores the structural dimensions of indigenous peoples' land dispossession.

The Crisis of Land Ownership and Cultural Displacement in *Sanggarguri* (2014) by Lalu Agus Fathurrahman

Then Agus Fathurrahman in his novel *Sanggarguri* (2014) presents an evocative narrative about the changing perceptions of the Sasak people towards land and the accompanying social impacts. The novel reflects how land, which in the tradition of Sasak society is a symbol of identity, ancestral heritage, and sacred space, has shifted in meaning to become a commodity subject to trade. In traditional societies, land is not only seen as an economic asset but also as an existential space that connects individuals to history, culture, and communal values. However, in the context of modernization and the expansion of capitalism, there has been a paradigm shift, transforming land into a mere economic object, thus creating social inequality and marginalization of indigenous communities. This shift aligns with a global phenomenon where the process of land capitalization often results in indigenous peoples losing access to their own land, as suggested by Hall et al. (2011) in their study on land tenure and agrarian conflict in Southeast Asia.

In *Sanggarguri*, Fathurrahman highlights the consequences of changing perceptions of land, which not only involve aspects of ownership but also extend to the social and cultural structures of the Sasak people. When land is sold to outsiders, it is not only physical assets that are lost, but also the community's social identity and connection to their ancestral land. This impact causes alienation, both socially and culturally, which ultimately changes the community structure to become more fragmented and vulnerable to economic exploitation. *Sanggarguri* not only portrays the

reality of Sasak society but also serves a reflection of the broader agrarian dynamics in Indonesia, where the conflict between traditional values and global capitalism continues. A fragment of the changing perception of land in Lalu Agus Fathurrahman's *Sanggarguri* appears in the following quote.

A wonderful explanation of man's relationship with his homeland as a mandate. This is something that is missing from the consciousness of people who call themselves modern civilization. Land has become a valuable asset, and people tend to look at it in terms of material value. People are more tempted by the high price of land, then sell the land of their birth and look for a new huniaan that is considered more modern. As a result, they lose their footing and bond with their ancestors. More fatally, physically the land of gumi paer has become the property of others.

Cases like this evenly occur throughout the gumi paer, the original owner community is not only displaced by ownership, but also socially displaced, no longer having a social relationship with the village. Culturally displaced, they no longer have a value attachment to the culture of their village and eventually they become a giddy marginalized community. The owners of Gumi Sasak are no longer Sasak people, and this condition has been going on for a long time and seems to be done systematically (Fathurrahman, 2014, p. 108-109).

The excerpt provides a critical literary reflection on the erosion of Sasak's indigenous land ethic due to commodification and external economic pressures. Fathurrahman points out the stark contrast between traditional and modern conceptualizations of land, illustrating how the transformation of land from sacred heritage to market commodity has led to the systematic marginalization of indigenous Sasak people. This paper utilizes the frameworks of political ecology and cultural displacement to analyze shifting perceptions of land in *Sanggarguri*.

The traditional Sasak worldview, as depicted in *Sanggarguri*, views land as gumi paer, an ancestral territory that embodies spiritual, social, and ecological connectedness. "As a result they lose their footing and bond with their ancestors" highlights how land is not only a physical space but also a continuum of cultural and ancestral identity. This is in line with Ingold's (2000) argument that indigenous peoples' perceptions of land are shaped by a relational ontology, where humans, ancestors and nature live in interdependent networks. However, the commoditization of land disrupts this balance. Fathurrahman points out the phenomenon experienced by the Sasak people that they are more attracted to the high price of land, then sell their homeland and look for new residences that are considered more modern. This illustrates how modern capitalist rationality, driven by land commercialization and urban expansion, has led to the voluntary relinquishment of ancestral territories. This shift reflects a global pattern of land alienation, as documented by Peluso and Van-

dergeest (2020), where indigenous peoples, under economic pressure or aspirations of modernity, become complicit in their land grabbing.

An important dimension of *Sanggarguri* is its exploration of how land grabbing extends beyond physical displacement into social and cultural marginalization. The phrase: “*Culturally displaced, no longer having value with the culture of their village and finally they become a giddy marginalized community*” highlights the existential crisis experienced by indigenous people who lose their ancestral lands. In the context of Lombok, as in many other indigenous territories affected by land commodification, the loss of land leads to proletarianization. This transition often results in economic insecurity, social dislocation, and identity fragmentation, thereby reinforcing cycles of marginalization and cultural erosion.

Furthermore, the process of land commodification in *Sanggarguri* illustrates the shifting semiotic relationship between humans and nature, which has implications for identity crisis and social alienation. In this context, the Sasak people who lost their land experienced a dislocation of meaning, where land once a symbol of cultural heritage has now turned into a capitalistic sign that can be traded. This is in line with Sebeok’s (2001) idea that ecological signs inherent in culture can undergo decontextualization due to the expansion of capitalism and globalization. The displacement of the indigenous Sasak people not only reflects an ecological crisis in the physical sense, but also reveals the erosion of ecological signs in their cultural meaning system. As such, *Sanggarguri* presents a broader narrative of how changing perceptions of land in local communities impact not only on economic aspects, but also on the transformation of sign systems that maintain their ecological identity.

From an ecosemiotic perspective, the text in the novel *Sanggarguri* by Lalu Agus Fathurrahman represents the symbolic relationship between humans and land as part of a cultural sign system that has deep meaning. Land in Sasak society is not just a physical entity, but a semiotic construct that embodies historical, spiritual, and ecological values that have been passed down from generation to generation. Within the ecosemiotic framework, as proposed by Kull (1998), the environment is not only understood as a material object but also as a sign system that shapes the social and cultural identity of a community. The loss of awareness of land as an ancestral mandate in the text reflects a shift in meaning from land as an existential space to land as a commodity, which in ecosemiotics is referred to as an ecological semiotic transformation.

Conclusions

This research reveals that changes in local people's perceptions of land in Indonesian literature reflect the complex dynamics among social, cultural, economic, and ecological factors. Through the analysis of various literary texts on *Mata di Tanah Melus*, *Tanjung Kemarau*, *Api Awan Asap*, *Tanah Tabu*, and *Sanggarguri*, it is evident that land not only functions as a physical space, but also as a semiotic entity that contains historical, spiritual, and community identity values. The shift in the perception of land from a sacred entity to an economic commodity occurs in line with the expansion of capitalism, urbanization, and exploitation of natural resources, as documented in various recent studies on agrarian conflict and ecological transformation (Li, 2020; Peluso & Lund, 2021).

In the last three years, studies on human-environment interactions have increasingly highlighted how agrarian policies, land capitalization, and the expansion of extractive industries impact indigenous peoples and local communities (McCarthy & Cramb, 2021; Hall et al., 2022). This study strengthens previous findings by demonstrating how Indonesian literature acts as an ecological archive that records and articulates people's experiences in facing ecological degradation and loss of ancestral lands. Through an ecosemiotic approach, this study reveals that literary narratives not only function as a form of documentation of socio-ecological changes, but also as a discursive space for cultural resistance to land grabbing and broader environmental paradigm shifts. The findings underscore the urgency to re-examine land ethics in the face of the ongoing socio-environmental crisis. While previous research has predominantly focused on the material consequences of environmental change, this study highlights epistemic and semiotic shifts in land perception, demonstrating how literature mediates evolving human-ecological interactions. As such, this research advances an interdisciplinary perspective within the environmental humanities and provides a critical vantage point for understanding the cultural dimensions of land conflicts in Southeast Asia. Future research should further explore how contemporary Indonesian literature engages with global environmental discourses and contributes to ecological resistance movements.

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